



GERALD HERBERT/AP

Category 5 Hurricane Michael delivered a devastating blow to the Panhandle and especially Mexico Beach, above, last October. The storm became much stronger than expected.

COVER
STORY

WHAT MICHAEL, IRMA and MATTHEW TAUGHT US

“People think they are going to have a lot of time to watch a storm like an Irma ... Michael was a pretty stark reminder that that is not always the case.”

— Michael Brennan of the National Hurricane Center

BY KEVIN SPEAR

Florida will start the 2019 hurricane season powerfully informed by Matthew’s scary miss of the east coast in 2016, the statewide crushing from Irma in 2017 and Michael’s brutal assault on the Panhandle last year.

Each of those monster storms was different in nature but none devastated a metropolitan area, something forecasters say will happen sooner or later.

Michael was particularly chilling for experts. It gained far more intensity than expected and, making landfall on Oct. 10, came as the June 1 to Nov. 30 hurricane season was winding down.

“Michael was more than a month later than the previous, strongest mainland U.S. landfalling hurricane we’ve ever seen,” said meteorologist Jeff Masters, a founder of the internet-based weather service, Weather Underground.

He said the storm would not have gotten so strong if Florida had not had its hottest September on record last year; the record warmth heated Gulf waters 2 to 3 degrees above average and that lingered into October.

“Hurricanes are heat engines,” Masters said. “You heat up the ocean, you provide them more energy. They take that heat energy and they convert it to the energy of their winds.”

Until Hermine hit in September 2016, Florida had not had experienced a hurricane strike for more than a decade.

But it was Matthew, topping out in the Caribbean as a Category 5 in October that year, that woke up the state’s east coast, with former Gov. Rick Scott warning residents “this storm will kill you.”

Matthew wound up skirting the coast, triggering costly flooding in St. Augustine

Please turn to **LESSONS, 6**